The Times They Were A-Changin' February 27

Jethro Lee spent eight years in the Air Force Security Service, with experience at a station in Key West, Florida, and several years at NSA. He was discharged from the Air Force in May 1968 and came to work as an NSA civilian in February 1969. This was a period of change in race relations, and, looking back at the times 30 years later, he shared some observations about African American life at the Agency in an interview with the Center for Cryptologic History.

Lee came in as a GS-9, several grades higher than African Americans usually were hired; this was due to his years of experience in cryptologic work in the Air Force. He also was fortunate that the person who offered him a job was Pauline Cook, an African American who had worked her way up to branch chief level. Cook and a few others, such as Minnie Kenny, mentored him, so that, as a signals analyst, Lee eventually rose to grade 15.

Lee came to know many African Americans who had started at lower grades and who were kept back from advancement because they were denied training opportunities. He admitted there was a natural reluctance on the part of supervisors to lose employees to lengthy classes at the National Cryptologic School; however, based on some experiences of his own, he had another explanation: "I believe it was pure and simple racism that prevented them from allowing those people to take classes."

Lee remembered that in 1971 or 1972, he had applied for the cryptanalysis intern program but had been turned down. He eventually was accepted, but he heard from one of his mentors that he had been rejected initially because a lady on the selection panel had found him "intimidating." Looking back during his retirement, Lee realized that that was the era of Black Power advocacy, and the Afro as a hair style was new and was something of a symbol for some advocates. Lee observed that "[n]ot only did I have a big bush, I grew a beard to go along with it. Now, reflecting back, as I got older, I could see where [the majority population] would be intimidated."

One facet of life for African Americans that was both burdensome and beneficial was transportation—that is, carpooling. Many African Americans had been hired when the Agency was located at Arlington Hall Station in Northern Virginia. When NSA moved to Fort Meade, Maryland, in stages in the late 1950s, most of them had no choice but to form car pools—many housing areas in Baltimore and the counties surrounding Fort Meade had restrictive covenants that prevented sales or rentals to minorities. This situation was changing when Lee came to NSA because of the federal fair housing laws of the late 1960s and the building of the "new town" of Columbia, but for years afterward many African Americans continued to commute from Northern Virginia or the District of Columbia.

On the other hand, carpooling allowed African Americans to form groups for mutual support. While traveling together, they shared news and information and career tips that might not have been available through any other means.

Looking back, Lee felt personal satisfaction. He had accomplished much at the Agency. Personally, he had earned two college degrees while working, attended the War College, and made it to grade 15. He was then in a position, as a member of panels and promotion boards, to help younger African Americans. "I feel I was very fortunate," he said, in summing up, "because I was able to overcome or be guided through a lot of the obstacles that other Blacks were being held back on."

This article is based on an interview conducted in May 1999 as research for a study on African Americans in cryptology during and after World War II. This research resulted in the 2001 publication *The Invisible Cryptologists*.